

Guidelines for ELA Instructional Materials Development

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Understanding Language

Language, Literacy, and Learning
in the Content Areas

Understanding Language aims to anchor academic content and language development for English Learners (ELs) by making explicit the language and literacy required to meet Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and Next Generation Science Standards (<http://ell.stanford.edu>)

1. **Begin with a potent set of Common Core ELA/disciplinary literacy standards.** Choosing standards around which to develop instruction involves much more than the creation of a “laundry list” of standards that appear to have relevance to the unit. Rather, designers of instructional materials should carefully select a small number of key standards across the various domains (reading, writing, listening/speaking, and language) that anchor compelling instruction for both students and teachers.
2. **Envision lessons and activities that allow students to engage with the standards in integrated, recursive, and generative ways throughout an instructional unit.** Although it is appropriate to highlight particular standards in particular activities, the goal is to move away from activities that are broken up into micro-level, discrete “skills” toward instructional lessons and units that provide multiple, recursive, and integrated opportunities for students to address the standards.
3. **For students with different academic and linguistic backgrounds, create various instructional pathways that promote high levels of access to, engagement with, and achievement of the standards.** The goal is to create supportive structures that allow students to engage in communities of practice that foster opportunities for “apprenticeship” and that lead, over time, to students’ full and independent participation.
4. **Select informational and literary texts that provide students with opportunities to encounter and engage with various kinds of text complexity.** Texts might, for example, feature multiple levels of meaning and purpose; different kinds of conventional and non-conventional structures; figurative, ironic, or ambiguous language; various levels of semantic and syntactic complexity; and different levels of background knowledge expected or required (see Appendix A in the ELA/Literacy Common Core State Standards for a description of different dimensions of text complexity as well as for target levels of text complexity for different grade bands).
5. **Prioritize which aspects of text complexity to focus on at various points during instruction, and provide support for students to engage with those aspects.** Not all texts need to represent all types of complexity, nor can all types of complexity in a single text be focused on simultaneously. Different texts might be chosen to emphasize different aspects of text complexity, or a single text might be engaged with in different ways throughout a lesson, focusing on different aspects of text complexity at different times.
6. **Provide opportunities to activate and build on students’ background knowledge—in ways that do not foreclose opportunities for them to engage with complex text.** ELLs, by definition, are still in the process of developing English language proficiency, and they also may be less familiar with the topics and content of assigned texts than their mainstream classmates. Therefore, preparing learners for engagement with complex text is essential. Leveraging students’ existing knowledge and building new knowledge can be accomplished in a number of ways before and during a lesson or unit of study—without preempting the text, translating its contents for students, telling students what they will learn in advance of reading a particular text, or “simplifying” the text itself.
7. **Engage students in opportunities to write in meaningful ways for different audiences and purposes.** Provide students with authentic models of the types of texts they are asked to produce and with guidance on the linguistic and rhetorical features of those text types.
8. **Utilize different participation structures.** ELLs need opportunities to engage in different kinds of instructional arrangements, from informal and collaborative group interactions to

formal presentations. They can be supported in using their existing linguistic resources in order to meet the standards, which call for them to collaborate with others to articulate ideas, interpret information, and present and defend claims.

9. **Focus on language as a resource for meaning making and as a “craft” for communicating with different audiences for different purposes.** Activities calling students’ attention to features of language (e.g. conventions of written and oral language, grammatical structures, and vocabulary) are important. Such a focus should be integrated with—rather than isolated from—meaningful and purposeful engagement with the texts and ideas at the heart of ELA instruction.
10. **Create instructional opportunities that recognize that all students, including ELLs, have linguistic resources that can be used to engage in activities designed to meet the ELA Standards.** ELLs are unlikely to sound or write like native English speakers, and they may not have yet developed a command of standard features of English. Yet they do bring a range of linguistic resources (home and community language practices, developing proficiency in English, emergent literacy skills) that can be used to engage deeply with the kinds of instruction called for in the rest of these guidelines. Effective instruction for ELLs capitalizes on students’ resources in order to facilitate access to the standards, which in turn promotes the continued expansion of ELLs’ linguistic repertoires in English.

NOTE: These guidelines draw in part on the following papers, prepared for the January, 2012, Understanding Language Conference at Stanford University and available at <http://ell.stanford.edu/papers/practice>.

Bunch, G., Kibler, A., & Pimentel, S. (2012, January). Realizing opportunities for English learners in the Common Core English Language Arts and Disciplinary Literacy Standards. Paper presented at the Understanding Language Conference, Stanford, CA.

Hull, G., and Moje, E. B. (2012, January). What is the development of literacy the development of? Paper presented at the Understanding Language Conference, Stanford, CA.

van Lier, L., & Walqui, A. (2012, January). How teachers and educators can most usefully and deliberately consider language. Paper presented at the Understanding Language Conference, Stanford, CA.

Walqui, A., & Heritage, M. (2012, January). Instruction for diverse groups of English language learners. Paper presented at the Understanding Language Conference, Stanford, CA.

Wong Fillmore, L., & Fillmore, C. (2012, January). What does text complexity mean for English learners and language minority students? Paper presented at the Understanding Language Conference, Stanford, CA.